DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 094 RC 020 282

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TITLE Farm Workers in the '90s: Where Do We Stand? Food First Action Alert.
INSTITUTION Institute for Food and Development Policy, Oakland, CA.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 7p.; Photographs may not reproduce adequately.
AVAILABLE FROM Subterranean Company, Box 160, 265 S. 5th St., Monroe, OR 97456 ($.50 each; 50 copies, $20; 100 copies, $30; 500 copies, $100).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Activism; *Agricultural Laborers; Collective Bargaining; Immigration; International Cooperation; *Labor Conditions; Labor Market; Migrant Children; *Migrant Workers; *Occupational Safety and Health; Poverty; Quality of Working Life; *Unions
IDENTIFIERS North American Free Trade Agreement

ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, the rise of independent farm labor contractors and Republican labor policies led to a deterioration in the economic well-being of farmworkers and their families. Delays in the implementation of new safeguards under the Worker Protection Standards Act have resulted in continuing exposure to pesticides, causing such exposure to remain a major health risk for farmworkers, their families, and children. Fifty percent of farmworkers live below the poverty level and their life expectancy is 49 years, figures that are unchanged since the 1960s. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) is known for its vision and strategic ability to plan for the future. Its three-way bargaining strategy created annual negotiations among workers, growers, and processors. By revealing the manner in which industries use labor contracting to exploit workers, FLOC has paved the way to innovative labor organizing. FLOC recently established a U.S.-Mexico union commission to oversee negotiations in both countries. They are contacting their counterparts in other countries to fight for agreements, crop by crop and company by company. Though the international tendency toward free trade marked by NAFTA and GATT increasingly plays off workers in different countries against each other, there are signs that labor is awakening and that a new generation of leaders is thinking creatively about trans-border organizing. Strategies for individual action in support of farmworkers include writing to local newspapers, honoring boycotts, supporting the National Farm Worker Ministry, contacting legislators, and getting involved with Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF). (TD)

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ED 399 094

FARM WORKERS IN THE '90S:

WHERE DO WE STAND?

By Shea Cunningham

FOOD FIRST ACTION ALERT
INSTITUTE FOR FOOD & DEVELOPMENT POLICY
FALL 1994

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FOOD FIRST ACTION ALERT 50¢

FALL INSTITUTE FOR FOOD & DEVELOPMENT POLICY 1994

FARM WORKERS IN THE '90s:

WHERE DO WE STAND?

— BY SHEA CUNNINGHAM*

It has to do with men, women and children who harvest the crops in this country of ours, the best fed nation on Earth. These are the forgotten people, the underprotected, the undereducated, the underclothed, the underfed. If it were not for the labor of [these] people...you might not starve but your table would not be laden with the luxuries that we have all come to regard as essential."

—EDWARD R. MURROW,
HARVEST OF SHAME, CBS TELEVISION, 1960

On Thanksgiving Day of 1960, the nation was shocked by the scenes of poverty depicted in *Harvest of Shame*, the CBS documentary about those whose labor produces our food. Edward R. Murrow told us that the average life expectancy of US farmworkers was only 49 years, while the national average was 70. Thirty-four years later the national average has risen to 75, yet farmworkers can still expect to live for only 49 years.[1]

In 1993 the average hourly wage for farmworkers was $5.00, or $5,000 per year for 25 weeks of farm work. That represents a drop in wages of $2.00 per hour in inflation corrected dollars since 1980.[2] Nearly 50% of all farmworkers live below the official US poverty line (62% for those born outside the U.S.), a figure that hasn't changed since the 1960's.[3]

During the Republican decade there was an overall deterioration in farmworker's economic well-being. And so, for the approximately 3 million men, women and children who toil in our fields, poor working conditions, low wages, long hours and lack of benefits continue to be the norm.

Photo by Evan Johnson/Impact Visuals

US Farmworkers suffer the second highest rate of occupational injuries of any profession.

THE FACES OF FARMWORKERS

Since the Bracero program of temporary immigration began during World War II, the vast majority of US farmworkers have been Mexican immigrants and their children, though earlier decades saw substantial numbers of Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Native and African-Americans.[4] By 1983, 90% of the 500,000 seasonal farm laborers in California were Mexicans or Chicanos, while nationwide the figure was 60%. Mixtec Indians from the impoverished Mexican state of Oaxaca make up the latest wave of migrants working in California fields,[5] and the fact that they are mostly non Spanish-speaking has made them easy prey for unscrupulous labor contractors.

* Shea Cunningham is a research assistant at Food First and is a co-author of *Dark Victory: The US, Structural Adjustment and Global Poverty.*

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FROM HOPE TO HARDSHIPS: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE UFW

During the 1970s California farmworkers in particular achieved significant improvements in their living and working conditions, as an upsurge in organizing and collective bargaining gave their community a new sense of hope. Thanks to the efforts of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW), the 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act granted the right to collective bargaining, and the administration of Governor Jerry Brown supported an increase in social services.

In the 1960s and 70s César Chavez, founder of the UFW, helped to focus public attention on the plight of migrant farm workers. Among the UFW's successful strategies under his leadership were hunger strikes and boycotts of grapes and other food crops. Chavez, once fasted for 36 days, proclaiming,

"A person who fasts and suffers for a much-needed societal change...can elicit from others the desire to share that suffering and thereby participate in eradicating a specific social injustice."[6]

Hundreds of people around the U.S. participated in the UFW hunger strike to call attention to the plight of the US farmworker and support the eventually victorious grape boycott. Chavez's famous chant, "Si se puede" (Yes, it is possible), inspired many.

At its peak in the 70s the UFW had some 120,000 workers under contract, and between 1966 and 1980 had succeeded in obtaining two 40% wage increases in the grape industry, among other gains.[7] But during the 1980s contracts began to expire and successive Republican administrations stacked the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board with pro-industry members, effectively gutting the law which created it. Facing a hostile political climate and internal differences, the UFW, together with the rest of U.S. organized labor, went into a decade long slump. Today the UFW has only some 20,000 workers under contract in the states of California, Texas and Florida.[8]

Last April, after the death of César Chavez, the UFW led a 350-mile pilgrimage to Sacramento, California. By retracing Chavez's historic march of 30 years ago, the UFW hoped to rebound from recent setbacks and demand pro-farmworker action from the Legislature. The 1994 march ended with a rally attended by nearly 13,000 people, demonstrating continued public concern and support for farmworkers and the UFW. It's still early to say whether the UFW can recapture its past glory, though so far this year they have won three elections and negotiated two new contracts in California, involving more than 1,000 workers.[9]

LABOR CONTRACTORS AND CORRUPTION

The 1980s saw the rise of independent labor contractors as key players in the farm industry. These middlemen, hired by growers to round up laborers and deliver them to the fields, have a reputation and history of mistreating farmworkers and cheating them out of a part of their wages.

Typical living conditions for US farmworke

Contractors function in the system to shield large growers from labor actions and legal claims, distancing them from the actual hiring of workers. When judgements come down against labor contractors, they often vanish or put their businesses into bankruptcy—only to emerge shortly thereafter in a new place or under a new name.[10]

The labor sub-contracting system is now a principlal obstacle to improving the welfare of farmworkers. Contractors pay less than growers, offer few benefits and little job security. The incidence of poverty is higher among contractor employees than among those directly hired by growers (71% vs. 56%), and they now make up at least 28% of migrant workers.[11] A key demand of the labor movement, therefore, is for legislation that makes growers legally responsible for their workers, whether or not they use contractors.

POISONING THE PEOPLE

One of the many health risks farmworkers face is their exposure to pesticides. National estimates of the number of farmworkers, farmers, and their families potentially exposed to pesticides range from 3.2 to 4 million people. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that there are 300,000 acute illnesses and injuries attributable to the occupational use of pesticides each year.[12]

Many families are forced to sleep, bathe and cook near the fields where they work and have no option but to use water that may be contaminated with pesticides. "We have to bathe in the irrigation channels by the fields," says one migrant worker. "We know they are filled with pesticides, but we can't live without removing the dirt of our daily work."[13] A 1990 study of migrant children working on farms in Western New York found that more than 40% of them had been sprayed while in the fields.[14]

Farmworkers frequently endure stomach ailments, headaches, rashes, burns, and other pesticide-related problems. Many suffer and die from cancer, while too often their babies are born with severe birth defects. In 1989 farmworker children in two towns of California's San Joaquin Valley contracted cancer at a rate between 800 and 1200% higher than the national average.[15] Legislation offers little help without pressure for enforcement from the public and strong unions. In 1983 the EPA recognized that its worker protection standards were inadequate to protect farmworkers from exposure to harmful pesticides and subsequently revised its standards, which now have once again been found to be deficient. On April 21, 1994, the EPA planned to implement new safeguards guaranteed under the Worker Protection Standards Act. But pressure from growers and agribusiness persuaded Congress to postpone the

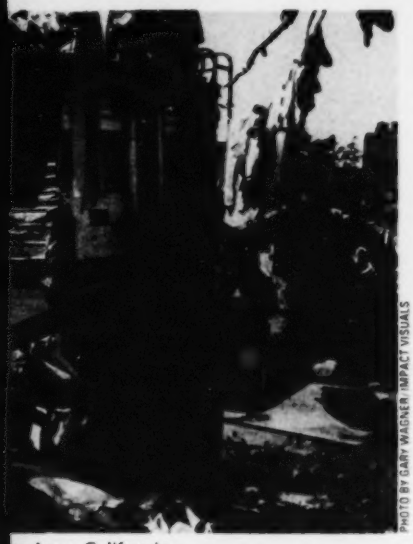

PHOTO BY GARY WAGNER / IMPACT VISUALS

an Jose, California.

date until January 1, 1995, and further attacks on the legislation by agribusiness are foreseen by farmworker activists.[16]

GLOBALIZATION AND FARM LABOR

In addition to the 1980s Republican rollback at home, U.S. policies during the decade enforced neo-liberal structural adjustment programs abroad, leading to the near collapse of rural economies in Mexico, Central America and elsewhere.[18] The resultant drop in corn prices throughout the Mesoamerican region has driven peasants off their lands, and, in many cases, into the U.S. where the number of farm laborors now far exceeds demand. This excess labor pool has decreased the bargaining power of unions and strengthened the hand of labor contractors and growers. Nothing short of overdue, but politically difficult policy changes in Latin America can turn this aspect of the situation around. The passage of NAFTA has made this more unlikely than ever, as it locks Mexican corn prices into a fifteen-year process of "ratcheting down," though Zapatista-induced political instability may yet make changes possible.[19]

FLOC: THREE-WAY BARGAINING AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZING

One farmworker union has long stood out for its vision and strategic ability to plan for the future. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), based in Ohio, has been defending migrant workers since 1967. FLOC has some 6,000 members and is best known for its innovative "three-way bargaining" strategy.

When FLOC first began organizing Midwestern tomato workers striking against individual growers, they rapidly won contracts only to find growers abandoning crops because of the squeeze between labor costs and the low prices paid for tomatoes by processors like the Campbell's Soup Company. FLOC changed tactics in the 80s, targeting the processors directly with a boycott, and eventually won a hard-fought agreement creating annual three-way negotiations between workers, growers and processors.[20] The agreement recognizes that the growers are in effect sub-contractors for the processors, in a way analogous to the role of labor contractors in agriculture in general.

This strategy has set a major precedent for not only the agricultural sector, but for labor as a whole. By revealing the manner in which many industries, like textiles and clothing, use labor contracting to over-exploit workers, FLOC has paved the way to innovative labor organizing in manufacturing as well.

FLOC began by organizing farmworkers in the Midwestern U.S., obtaining wage increases, better housing and increased social and health services. But just prior to winning their initial agreement with Campbell's in 1986, the first threats were made to move production south. In fact, Campbell's produces large quantities of processed tomato products in the Sinaloa Valley in Mexico, and has repeatedly tried to play off U.S. and Mexican farmworkers against one another, making them compete to see who can work for less.

"Capital as we know it today has no nationality. It goes where it wants to, when it wants to, almost however it wants to, in order to reproduce itself," said Baldemár Velásquez, FLOC's president. "It dawned on me," said Velásquez, "that we are citizens of the company we work for, it makes no sense to exclude Mexican workers from wage and working conditions negotiations for the same company. You can't be an isolationist in Michigan when the same corporation produces in Ohio and Indiana. So what's the difference when it's the US and Mexico?"

Before NAFTA, FLOC had began to work in consort with Mexican unions to pressure Campbell's on both sides of the border, and recently established a US-Mexico union commission to oversee negotiations in both countries. They are in the process of contacting their counterparts in other states and countries to fight for agreements crop by crop and company by company, and this year formed a federation of farmworker unions called the Farmworker Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, to which eight unions now belong.[22]

WILL A PHOENIX ARISE FROM THE ASHES OF U.S. LABOR?

The fate of farmworker unions during the 1980s mirrored that of organized labor in general, as hard-won gains were eroded or rolled back entirely, and the percentage of the workforce belonging to unions dropped precipitously. The UFW, as the biggest target in agriculture, suffered the most. But as with groups like Teamsters for a Democratic Union and similar insurgent forces in other industries, FLOC and some younger unions developed new strategies that may blossom in the 90s.

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❑ Chile's Free-Market Miracle: A Second Look (October '94) — *Joseph Collins and John Lear* $15.95 $ _____

❑ Dark Victory: The US, Structural Adjustment, and Global Poverty — *Walden Bello with Shea Cunningham and Bill Rau* $12.95 $ _____

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❑ Farmworkers in the '90s: Where Do We Stand?

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Though the international tendency toward free trade marked by NAFTA and GATT increasingly plays off workers in one country against those in another, there are signs that labor is awakening from the doldrums and that a new generation of leaders is thinking creatively about trans-border organizing. NAFTA can thus be viewed two ways: both as a powerful blow against both U.S. and Mexican workers, but also as a watershed event in the revitalization of labor. The UFW is showing new signs of life, and FLOC and other regional unions are picking up the tempo of organizing. The missing piece of the puzzle may well be for the U.S. public to awaken to the plight of migrant farmworkers in the 90s, as it did through the Grape Boycott in the 70s, forming the apex of a triangle, the basis of which will be solidarity between organized workers on both sides of the border.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. **Write an op-ed piece for your local newspaper,** explaining the need to refocus the public's attention on the plight of US farmworkers.
2. **Honor UFW and FLOC boycotts.** Offer your time and/or financial support to these unions; UFW, P.O. Box 62, Keene, CA 93531, tel. (805) 822-5571, and FLOC, 507 S. Saint Clair St., Toledo, OH 43602, tel. (419) 243-3456.
3. **Support the National Farm Worker Ministry,** an ecumenical organization dedicated to supporting organizing efforts, boycotts and campaigns. The NFWM provides information on how to support farmworker struggles nationally. Contact them at 1337 West Ohio, Chicago, IL 60622, tel. (312) 829-6436.
4. **Contact your legislators** and press them to support the EPA Worker Protection Standard without further delay. For more information contact the Farmworker Justice Fund, 2001 S St., NW, suite. 210, Washington, DC, tel. (202) 462-8192.
5. **Get involved with Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF),** an organization which brings farmworkers and students together to share resources and skills, improve farmworker conditions and build coalitions for change. For more information contact SAF at P.O. Box 90803, Durham, NC 27708, (919) 660-3652.

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BOYCOTT DOLE BANANAS AND PINEAPPLES

Dole's subsidiary, the Oceanview Produce Company of Oxnard, CA, is carrying out a campaign of intimidation against workers and UFW organizers. In June, 1994, the California Agriculture Labor Relations Board ruled the UFW official winner of the Oxnard union election, and issued a complaint against Dole for illegally firing two employees, discriminating against others for union activity, denying the UFW access to workers, and refusing to negotiate. So far Dole has not responded or changed their practices.[17]

You can help by pressuring Dole. Declare that you will boycott all Dole products if they do not reinstate illegally fired workers, end acts of intimidation, discipline company agents and labor contractors, respect election results, and negotiate a contract in good faith.

Write to David Murdock, Chair & CEO, Dole Company, P.O. Box 5132, Westlake Village, CA 91359. Tel: (800) 232-8888, Fax: (818) 879-6628.

FOOTNOTES:

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2. "March for farm labor reaches Capitol: 'Pilgrims' retrace steps César Chavez took in 1966," Edgar Sanchez. San Francisco Examiner, section B-4, 4-24-94.
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21. 1992 keynote speech by Baldemár Velásquez.
22. Phone interview with Andrea De Urquiza, FLOC, July 1994

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November 19, 1996
Re: RC 020 282

We are resubmitting the above-captioned document, titled "Farm Workers in the '90s: Where Do We Stand," published by the Institute for Food and Development Policy, as education-related.

Migrant education is a field defined by the employment of families who move in order to work in agriculture or fisheries. The field exists because of the threatening conditions that such employment imposes on these families and their children, and, therefore, knowledge of these conditions is important for educators working with migrant children. For instance, eligibility for the Migrant Education Program--provisions for which have recently changed--depend on an understanding of these conditions (Wright, 1995).

This advocacy document describes conditions affecting families and children, and interprets such conditions in light of trends in business and labor in both the U.S. and Mexico (e.g. "following a report of statistics this report concludes, "for the approximately 3 million men, women, and children...continue to be the norm" [p. 3]; in a discussion of the changing ethnic composition of the migrant population, "the vast majority of US farmworkers have been Mexican immigrants and their children" [p. 3]; in a discussion of poisoning, "Many families ... use water contaminated with pesticides" [p. 4] and "farmworker children in two towns...contracted cancer at a rate between 800 and 1200% higher...").

The Clearinghouse's own publication program responds to the need to promote understanding of migrant life ways. In 1993, the Clearinghouse published a Digest "Health Problems Among Migrant Farmworkers' Children in the US" (Huang, 1993; copy attached). In addition, in 1994, we published "Migrant Farmworkers and their Children (Martin, 1994). The sole warrant for these publication is that the conditions reported affect educational performance. This is the same warrant under which the captioned document was selected and processed for the database; the only difference in this case is that the warrant is not explicitly stated by the author. This does not render it less salient.

We have modified the indexing and the abstract to reflect content relevant to children and families.

per Craig Howley and Susan Voelkel

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